INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNITY HISTORY: CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN THE OKANOGAN COUNTRY

INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNITY HISTORY: CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN THE OKANOGAN COUNTRY

by

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In fall 1982, Max Peterson, Chief, US Forest Service, directed the agency to consider ways in which the contributions of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) had benefited the Forest Service mission. This would become part of the CCC's 50th Anniversary, to be celebrated in 1983.

At the time, I was public affairs officer and historian for the Okanogan National Forest in northern Washington State, and an editor of HERITAGE, a quarterly history journal published by the Okanogan County Historical Society.

PLANNING

To best use my time, I proposed to Bill McLaughlin, Okanogan forest supervisor, that the Okanogan forest set as the theme for its 1983 Okanogan County Fair exhibit "A Salute to the Civilian Conservation Corps - 50th Anniversary 1933-1983." This would be the centerpiece of our commemoration.

The photographs and information I would gather for the exhibit could be used in the winter edition of HERITAGE, and establish another piece of the Forest Service's institutional history and its relationship to the community history of Okanogan County.

Initial planning for the research began. Given the extensive CCC physical record of activity for this national forest, I believed it would be easy to locate necessary records and other documentation.

I would utilize Okanogan National Forest files, the microfilmed files of THE WENATCHEE WORLD, the historical society's collection of county newspapers, the US Army files, and interview local, former CCC enrollees.

Very soon, I discovered the Army's files from its CCC administration days could not be located, by the Army. If Army files pertaining to the CCC exist, I could find no one who knew where they were.

Forest Service files in the Pacific Northwest pertaining to the CCC did exist, but were widely scattered, and eventually proved to contain no reference to the Okanogan country.

One particular difficulty in tracking records is because the Okanogan National Forest was known between 1907 and 1955 as the Chelan National Forest, and a portion of today's Okanogan forest was until 1943 part of the Colville National Forest. Also, part of the pre-1955 Chelan forest is today administered by the Wenatchee National Forest. Present files at the Seattle federal records center and in Washington, D.C., echo this confusion.

File searches of Forest Service records proved to be of little value.

I then turned to the newspapers of northcentral Washington, in hope of learning about CCC campsites and projects.

For reasons I never learned, weekly newspapers in Okanogan County made little reference to the CCC, so were not helpful. Perhaps the publishers were Republicans?

THE WENATCHEE WORLD (published Monday through Saturday) reported extensively on the CCC program. Of special interest were the CCC camps near Wenatchee and Chelan. The stories were quite laudatory, and supportive of the program. But there was very little about the CCC in the Okanogan country.

What initially had been seen as an interesting but easy research project had turned out to be less fun, and most exasperating. Time had passed quickly; it was now May 1983, and the county fair was 90 days away, the HERITAGE due date was 120 days away.

And, as yet, I had not found a single photograph of an Okanogan County CCC project. The county museum had none, the Forest Service files had none, the WENATCHEE WORLD files had only one photograph in newspaper accounts.

ORAL HISTORY

The initial plan had included some oral history interviews of former CCC enrollees who had worked on projects in Okanogan County. This was not because I knew who these people were; I assumed it would be easy enough to find a few of them.

By early July, I was frantic! With one exception, every single former CCC enrollee I had talked with in Okanogan County, there were 26 of them, had worked elsewhere. None of them had photos of CCC focus.

By chance, a reporter friend discovered a former CCC worker who had worked on projects for the Forest Service in Okanogan County. She wrote a small story, and used some of his photographs which he had taken while in the CCC. My first break.

Charles "Butch" Hardy

Butch Hardy was my first oral history interview about the CCC days in Okanogan County. He had good recall, and his wife kept him honest.

Butch had become the private, unofficial camp photographer for Camp Gold Creek (C.C.C. F-65) in the Methow Valley of Okanogan County, during his tour of duty between 1937 and 1939. Unfortunately, a few months prior to his discharge from the CCC, his boxes of photographs and his camera were stolen. The few photographs he still had were, however, a good start towards meeting my needs.

Butch proved to be a delightful storyteller. An easterner from Pennsylvania, he had longed to go west. The CCC, by chance, afforded him that opportunity.

"I joined the Cees for a job," said Hardy, "and because my folks were having a hard time (on the farm), $25 of the $30 a month I got paid (by the CCC) went home. Ten dollars a month kept the mortagage paid. It meant my folks had a place to live."

Hardy was a sophomore in high school when he saw a CCC recruitment advertisement in a local newspaper.

"I talked with Dad and said, 'I'm going to join that.' He said it was up to me. So I went to Olean (New York) and they gave me a physical examination.

"The whole examination was pretty easy; bad ears and flat feet didn't keep you out. I think that if you could show you needed a job you were in, unless there was something seriously wrong with you."

Hardy came home from the examination, to learn three days later that he had been accepted and was to report to Quaker Bridge CCC Camp, New York.

"All during school, I had two things in my mind, from geography and history. I wanted out of New York, and I wanted to go to Maine or the State of Washington -- Maine because of the romance of logging; Washington because of the University of Washington. I used to root for their football team which was quite well known in those days."

Hardy's first assignment was to work at Allegheny State Park, then on to Shingle House, Pennsylvania, where one day he read a bulletin board notice asking for volunteers to go to Washington state.

"I damn near broke everybody's legs getting down there (to volunteer), but I was first in line! That's how bad I wanted to get out to Washington. I've been here ever since.

Between Butch Hardy and wife Mildred, they recalled the locations of many CCC camps in Okanogan County, and names of locally employed men (LEMs) who had been hired by the Forest Service to supervisise the CCC enrollees.

Butch was able to tell the story of camp life, and Mildred talked about community relations between residents of Camp Gold Creek and the Methow Valley.

Mildred's father was then a Forest Service guard living at the Poorman Creek guard station near Twisp, Washington. She first met Butch when he and other CCC men visited the home.

Said wife Mildred (Risley) Hardy, "We invited them into the house, at times. Of course, Dad (Clyde Risley) worked for the Forest Service, and the fellows were welcome.

"There were strained relations earlier in the 30's when men came in (to the Methow Valley) from the South. They'd be in Twisp in the streets fighting each other with knives, which didn't go over too hot. Things like that.

"But Butch's group was mostly farm kids, and they stayed here longer. Local folks got to know them better. They went to local dances and played in the local ball teams."

Butch Hardy recalls, "A bunch of the boys from the Gold Creek CCC Camp, including me, joined the Carlton (near Twisp) team, and we had the best ball team in the whole area! Of course, we had 350 guys to pick from, so we had some good ball players. We sort of took the little town of Carlton by storm," but the town provided the team its uniform.

Many CCC men did not remain long in the camps.

"A lot of the kids got homesick, especially the city kids. The mountains were quite scary to them, the cougars and bears, and the Indians. The whole Western idea was too much for many of them," said Butch.

But to Hardy, the American West was everything he had hoped it would be. It was "...home to cowboys and Indians, kind of a rough place, not many settlements, sort a frontier back country in the Okanogan...This was the right sort of country for me."

Butch Hardy was a gem of an information source about the CCC, both for his recollections and his small photo collection. I copied his photos, with a negative set going to the Okanogan Historical Society, and one remaining with the Okanogan National Forest.

Bob Crandall

Bob Crandall joined the CCC about the time Butch Hardy left it in 1939. Bob's recollections covered both camp life and the sensibilities of the times.

Bob and Butch have long been friends, and enjoy reminiscing about the CCC days, and sharing memories about the Depression years. They both now live in the Methow Valley.

"I literally came off a freight train into the CCC," said Crandall, "to three square meals a day, bed sheets on the bed, all the clothes we could ever ask for, and they paid us.

"The CCC made people feel they were doing something of value and were wanted and useful...It gave us a foundation to be built on for later in life...The CCC gave me my start in life, something a lot of us back then my age thought would never happen. I owe my life to the CCC," said Crandall, tears glistening in his eyes.

Given the times, the CCC enrollees were surprisingly not very political.

"We weren't really interested very much in politics or war. There was Lindbergh on one side urging us to stay out of European affairs, and there were other people wanting to arm the nation. Given the times, we were interested only in our personal survival. We were interested mostly in our jobs; how much money we would get; what we would do with it eventually.

"But," Crandall noted, "the first several years of Roosevelt's administration were real wild times! It was considered a war, actually. They had the NRA marchers, and the manufacturers would dress up in white shirts and march down the street, just the same as the American Legion, carrying the flag.

"It became a very patriotic period of time! The war they were fighting was the Depression. There was a lot of fervor about it, and a lot of hope that things would change...1933 was just the bottom of everything! There was a sense of doom over the whole country....you wondered what life held for you...."

Crandall was assigned to Camp Growden in the Kettle Range country west of Colville, Washington. His first few weeks were spent felling fire snags near Sherman Pass, where a major forest fire had devastated the area some years earlier.

He became an infirmary attendant by the winter. Came spring in 1940, Camp Growden was closed. Personnel and equipment were moved to a summer camp at Lost Lake near Tonasket, Washington.

Crandall relished recalling stories about his time at Lost Lake.

"People will be people, and there were always little schemes to make additional money. The Top Sergeant had me running his 'bank.' He couldn't do it himself.

"The standard rate of interest was 50 cents for every dollar loaned. Money was always short. We'd play cards for money, shoot craps for money, borrow money.

"I ran the Top Sergeant bank. When pay day came, that $5 loan became $7.50. The reason I tell the story is that one pay period, it was decided to show how much influence the CCC payroll had in the local communities. Pay was to be in silver dollars.

"Come pay day, the payroll clerk set up a desk with a blanket over it, a .45 automatic revolver sitting on it, along with sacks of silver dollars. There was a line of boys in front of the desk, and as the clerk read off the roll, you stepped up for your pay.

"There was another line of boys off to the side of the clerk's desk. That line was of the people you owed money to, and that's where I was on behalf of the Top Sergeant. I could hardly stagger out of the place with that load of silver in every pocket. I was glad they paid in paper after!"

Most of the CCC men who came to the Okanogan country were easterners, and white.

In the early years of the CCC, some all-black groups did work on the Okanogan (then Chelan) National Forest.

Apparently not all went well for the black men.

A letter from then Forest Supervisor P.T. Harris to by-then retired Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot, a friend of Harris', makes only briefest mention of a "race riot...the Negro doesn't seem equipped for this work."

I had included questions to all interviewees about racial relations, but until Crandall, no one had made any remarks.

"The Negroes probably had the most difficulty here (of all CCC enrollees), because few of the local folks had ever met a colored man. The Negroes and the locals kept their distance from each other."

Crandall admitted there had been rumors of racial strife, and provided me with the names of several people employed by the Forest Service as LEMs who were alleged to have provoked an "axe handle party."

I later interviewed all of the persons named by Crandall, but none could recall any problems or strife. However, two other interviewees confirmed Crandall's information, people who did not know him.

Coverage by the press did not include reference to racial strife, but there was media interest in the "Negro camps."

THE WENATCHEE WORLD, in one issue, devoted an entire page to various aspects of the "Negro" or "colored" lifestyles, right down to emphasizing the men's interest in watermelons, ribs, and slothfulness. The stories seemed to be written with a certain amount of wonder on the part of the reporters, who quite possibly had never met a black person. The reporters missed using only a few racial stereotypes.

Bob Crandall was discharged from the CCC at Lost Lake on September 20, 1940. He went to work on a local ranch. He was subsequently inducted into the US Army in 1942.

After discharge from the Army, he worked at a gold mine in the Methow Valley, and for nearly 30 summers worked for the Forest Service.

ORAL HISTORY REVIEW

By late August, I had conducted 64 oral interviews of former CCC enrollees. Few were as sparkling and informative as those of Crandall and Hardy. Some were with men whose CCC experience had been in other parts of the country, and I forwarded those interviews to national forests on which those men had worked.

A few men had photographs showing themselves and their friends at work and at play at CCC camps. The prices of a camera, film development, and photo finishing were costly, and likely prohibitive to many men.

At the time of my interviewing, no source book was available detailing the specific history of the CCC, nor the steps a CCC enrollee went through between induction and discharge. Time was taken by me to obtain this information during the interviews, but the time was seldom worth it.

Questions to most of the enrollees about CCC structure, management and operations did not develop much reliable information. The perspective was the all-too-traditional one of the "bottom-runger;" interesting, but the facts were pretty loose.

Also, policies changed, sometimes in major ways, during the 10 year life of the CCC. What I at first thought were errors in recollection by the interviewee frequently turned out to be true when confirmed by subsequent interview.

None of the oral history interviewees were under 70 years of age. Most were born during the period between 1907 and 1912. Many of their friends had died in World War II or Korea. Some interviewees had good recall; others had little more to say than to praise the CCC for its conservation work, and its social and economic benefits for themselves - job, food, shelter, and medical care.

I was interviewing remnants of a once vast army of young, able-bodied men.

But one thing nearly all shared was a catch in the throat, and tears welling up as they spoke of their enrollment in the CCC. Warm clothes, soft, clean beds, plenty of food, medical care, educational opportunities, camraderie - all of this in a time when the future was without hope, when even survival of the civilization and oneself was in doubt, and when promise meant only a promise of worse to come.

For some men, it was almost treasonous to acknowledge to the interviewer some unsavory aspects of life in CCC camps. I was an outsider, not privileged to know what only one's buddies were privy to. Only after I promised to not include in audiotape transcriptions such information did even a few of them agree to provide another side of life in the CCC.

Some fellows admitted to participating in racial harrassment of nonwhite enrollees. Others noted the absence of female companionship at camp, how this was viewed by local residents, and how it was handled by the enrollee.

The men who remained in Okanogan County after they were discharged were few in number. Most enrollees returned to their east coast, city homes. Local men who enrolled in the CCC went elsewhere for assignment, but they felt great kinship with the CCC programs conducted in Okanogan County.

Almost all of the easterners who stayed in the Okanogan married local women, raised families here, and conducted their livelihood in the county.

Many of their children, now in theirs 40s, echo their father's praises of the CCC and its benefits. For these children, traditional values concerning land use ethics, conservation of natural resources, and respect for hard work are common.

It may well be that the CCC brought for the first time to the citizens of the West a strong sense of conservation, a time before the vast national forests in the western states were called upon to provide resources for war, and the wearying peace that has followed.

The interviewees, to a man, called for a return of the CCC to again put young people in the nation's forests, to "help the Forest Service cleanup the campgrounds, clear trails, pick up litter." A generic Call to Arms!

It was also clear that among the interviewees, the Forest Service was a federal agency still holding their respect. Any criticism of today's agency seemed more to be a lament for a time when there were fewer people, less ill-will, when the forests were filled with game and fish, when one was once young.

EPILOGUE

When the Okanogan County Fair was held in September 1983, the Forest Service's exhibit became a focal point for many visitors. Many former CCC workers and their families came to the exhibit to see the many photos of old camps, some familiar faces, flags, decals, discharge papers, CCC uniforms, sports shirts from CCC baseball and basketball teams, and other memorabilia provided me in the course of my interviews.

I remember one gentleman arriving in a wheelchair, his eyesight fading, 82 years old. He told us "...I can't see your pictures, but my eyesight is excellent for the memories you have brought back to me. My grandaughter told me of you folks, and although I have not been out of my home for three years because of sickness, I had to come. I had to come."

There wasn't a dry eye in the place, and as I write this, there is again a catch in my throat.

All of the frustrations of the past year faded completely that day. I envied that man his memories.

END

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ADDENDUM to INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNITY HISTORY:
CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN THE OKANAOGAN COUNTRY (GIBBS)

THE CCC IN OKANOGAN COUNTY

by

ALLEN GIBBS

The CCC has proven to be more than development of Okanogan County's national forest lands.

For some people, it is a Sunday drive to the Bonaparte Lake Campground that "Grandpa built."

It is a drive to Hart's Pass in the Methow Valley, around still scary Dead Horse Point where the world falls away to the river thousands of feet below, but where once-young men learned the art of road building from instructors in the CCC.

Throughout Okanogan County today are countless reminders of the accomplishments of the many public works programs of the New Deal, programs in addition to the CCC.

Post offices, airstrips, parks, erosion control projects and the like are among them. Certainly, the most visible monument to the period is Grand Coulee Dam.

But there were other projects, the fruits from them now mostly taken for granted by the newer and younger residents of the county.

Nearly all of the county's national forest campgrounds, up to 75 at one time, ranging from campgrounds with two units up to others with 40 units, were built by the CCC.

Hundreds of miles of forest roads were built to provide access for fire protection. Many of these roads have subsequently been widened for recreation and timber harvest traffic, but others remain unchanged from the 1930s, right down to the wooden drainage ditches set diagonally across the roadway.

The CCC built most of the fire lookout stations which have stood on the county's isolated peaks. Most all of the Forest Service warehousing

facilities were CCC-built. The ranger station compounds at Twisp, Early Winters, and Conconully were built by the CCC.

CCC crews built forest offices and docks at Stehekin, Lucerne, and 25-Mile Creek on Lake Chelan. The beautiful guard station at Lost Lake still stands, as does much of what was once the Lost Lake CCC Camp, now used as a youth camp.

The CCC built an emergency airstrip deep inside the Pasayten country (now the Pasayten Wilderness, but then called the North Cascades Primitive Area), to provide a landing spot for personnel and equipment flown in to fight forest fires in that vast unroaded country.

Hundreds of miles of old trails developed in the last century by prospectors, trappers and, even earlier, the Indians, were improved, and hundreds more of new construction were done.

The Salmon Meadows Ski Lodge and warming hut were built of native stone and logs hewn from the immediate area. Workmen forged the hinges and decorative ironwork. Chairs, benches and tables still in use today, were crafted by CCC workers, some who only months early had never used hammer or saw.

Thousands of acres of forest land burned in the late 1920s, the result of an extended drought period. Much of this acreage was cleared of snag trees and reforested.

Hundreds of forest fires in the 1930s were kept small by an army of CCC workers stationed at forest camps in Okanogan County. Crews were frequently dispatched to fight fire elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, including British Columbia.

The men who worked as CCC "enrollees," the official term for the workers, came mostly from the eastern and southern states; only a few were from the Pacific Northwest. Most came from the cities and farms of New York , New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Alabama, and the New England States.

Some enrollees after discharge from the CCC remained in the county, but most returned home. Many enlisted or were drafted in World War II, highly valued by the armed forces for the skills and discipline they had learned in the CCC.

The works of the CCC in Okanogan County have outlived most of the men who built them. Men who, in the depths of the Great Depression, made long-lasting contributions to the protection and use of the natural resources of the Okanogan National Forest, and the rest of Okanogan County. Their works have benefited millions of people who have since used the campgrounds, the trails, and the roads they built.

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ADDENDUM to INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNITY HISTORY: CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN THE OKANOGAN COUNTRY (GIBBS)

A REVIEW OF THE CCC

by

ALLEN GIBBS

The Civilian Conservation Corps was one of the more popular New Deal programs, and ranks with the major hydroelectric projects on the Columbia River system as a significant federal government venture in the West.

The CCC was an important social program, employing millions of young men in conservation work for the US Departments of Agriculture and Interior. In the eastern United States, CCC men developed many state and local parks, built forest trails and roads, restored historic sites, built the Lake Placid ski hill, and did extensive reforestation work.

In the midwestern United States, CCC men did similar work, but the emphasis was on erosion control.

It was in the western United States that the CCC's works were most extensive, in part because of the vast acreages of federal lands providing employment projects. The other reason was very much at the heart of the Roosevelt Administration.

With every fourth employable American male out of work by 1933, panic was spreading through a seemingly immobilized nation. Newly-elected President Franklin Roosevelt saw his task as one to jolt the American people out of despair.

"First of all," he said at his inauguration on March 20, 1933, "let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed effort to convert retreat into action."

Millions sitting by their radios leaned forward to catch a breath of new hope from their new leader.

The nation, he said, was in a kind of war, and now the challenge was for the President to give vigorous leadership. "This nation asks for action, and action now."

Among his first efforts during the famous first "Hundred Days" was the combining of his favorite cause - conservation of natural resources - with programs to employ some of the 15 million unemployed.

Huge numbers of young men were wandering the nation's city streets, many men having come from farms lost to banks, taxes or erosion. Millions more were still on farms not yet lost.

It was Roosevelt's idea to put these young men to healthful and socially productive labor in the nation's forests, parks, and grasslands.

Within days of the inauguration, Congress passed the Emergency Conservation Work Act, establishing the Civilian Conservation Corps, soon to be known then, and now some 53 years later, as the CCC.

Robert Fechner was appointed director of a variety of conservation work programs, including the CCC.

By June 1933, 300,000 young men were at work in more than a thousand forest camps across the nation, building fire roads and trails, developing parks and campgrounds, constructing dams for flood and erosion control, building new forests out of millions of acres of forest lands devastated by fire, constructing fire lookout stations and other structures to be used by the Forest Service, the National Park Service, the new Soil Conservation Service, and many state resource agencies and Indian tribes.

More importantly, CCC workers were building self-esteem, regaining healthy bodies, and slowly rebuilding their faith in a future no longer dimmed by despair.

Nearly three million young men were eventually employed by the CCC. Although the program continued into 1943, most eligible men had joined the war effort by 1941.

While other New Deal-era public works programs came under fire for various reasons, the CCC was mostly free from major criticsm. And the men who worked in the CCC have not forgotten their many fine accomplishments, indicated by the many CCC alumnae associations which have sprung up across the country the past few years.

These men are deeply proud of their work as "Cees," and their association with what was and is, easily, the most popular of the New Deal programs.

It was with much pleasure and great pride that the 50th Anniversary of the Civilian Conservation Corps was celebrated in 1983.

END

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